

Fact Sheet
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Burma: Democratic Aspirations

“The world is watching the people of Burma take to the streets to demand their freedom, and the American people stand in solidarity with these brave individuals. I call on those who embrace the values of human rights and freedom to support the legitimate demands of the Burmese people.”

- President George W. Bush

Peaceful Demonstrations

In an act of courage, thousands of Buddhist monks and ordinary citizens took to the streets in Burma in September 2007. They staged a series of peaceful demonstrations demanding freedom, democracy and respect for human rights. The unrest began in August with pro-democracy activists protesting against a doubling of fuel prices. Soon after, the number of protestors swelled to the tens of thousands.

Junta Crackdown

The ruling military junta resorted to violence rather than engaging in a dialogue with pro-democracy leaders and ethnic minority groups. The crackdown against monks and unarmed civilian demonstrators resulted in ten deaths and the imprisonment of some 4,000, according to the regime. Diplomatic sources, however, state that the numbers of those killed, injured and imprisoned are much higher than those officially reported.

Long Military Repression

The 45-year long military rule in Burma has curtailed basic freedoms of speech, assembly and worship. Its reign of terror has plunged a once progressive nation into poverty, repression and chaos. Thousands of Burmese have fled to neighboring countries. There are over 1,000 political prisoners, including Nobel Peace Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, whose party was elected to power in 1990 by an overwhelming majority in the last free elections held in Burma.

U.S. Reaction

In his speech before the U.N. General Assembly on September 25, President Bush announced the steps that the United States Government will adopt to help bring peaceful change to Burma.

Tighten economic sanctions on the leaders of the regime and their financial backers.

Impose an expanded visa ban on those responsible for the most egregious violations of human rights, as well as their family members.
Continue supporting the efforts of humanitarian groups working to alleviate suffering in Burma.

United Nations Response

United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon sent UN Special Advisor for Burma Ibrahim Gambari to Burma to voice the concerns of the international community, persuade the military junta to stop the crackdown against prodemocracy activists, and facilitate a dialogue between the regime and the democratic opposition.

Special Advisor Gambari briefed the UN Security Council on October 5 on his September 29 – October 2 visit to Burma, during which he met with Senior General Than Shwe and prodemocracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi. He was not able to meet with other detainees, other members of the National League for Democracy, or representatives of the Buddhist clergy. Secretary General Ban, who joined the October 5 briefing, denounced the regime's crackdown as "abhorrent and unacceptable." He called for active international support of the UN good offices mission, including that of the UN Security Council. Special Advisor Gambari plans to return to Burma soon to encourage a dialogue between the regime and leaders of the democratic opposition, including Aung San Suu Kyi.

On October 11, the UN Security Council issued a Presidential Statement reaffirming its support for the UN good offices mission, deploring the regime's use of violence against peaceful demonstrations, and stressing the need for dialogue between the regime and all concerned parties, including Aung San Suu Kyi.

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